

# **The Clash: Rebels With A Cause**

An Honors Thesis (HONORS 499)

by

Elizabeth Rasberry

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Abel Alves

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Abel Alves', followed by a long, horizontal, wavy line extending to the right.

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## Abstract

The rebellious actions and politicized lyrics of The Clash has set them apart as one of the influential rock bands ever. Many of The Clash's songs focus not only on life in Great Britain during the 1970s and 1980s, but later in their career they went far beyond English shores. Their later albums, Sandinista! and Combat Rock criticize such issues as the war in Vietnam, and their support for the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. I hope to write a concise history of The Clash and analyze their politically driven songs and the social setting that gave rise to them.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to sincerely thank Dr. Abel Alves who has been beyond patient, helpful and supportive as my thesis advisor. Without him this project could not have been completed. He has been a truly inspiring professor throughout my college career.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Mick Jones and Paul Simonon, the two members of The Clash I have been lucky enough to meet. They showed me that the surviving members of The Clash are still gracious, thoughtful and kind to their fans. Meeting both of them helped inspire the basis for this thesis.

## Images:

Figure 1        Smith, Pennie. “The Clash meet Bo Diddly, the Pearl Harbor tour bus, February 1979.” Cited in Marcus Gray, *Route 19 Revisited: The Clash and London Calling* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2010), 86.

Figure 2        “Members of Steel Pulse and The Clash protesting outside of Martin Webster’s home (a National Front leader).” Cited on Uncarved.org. *UK reggae and the National Front*. <<http://www.uncarved.org/blog/2008/09/smash-the-national-front-part-two/>>.

## **Introduction:**

They were commonly known as “the only band that matters.” A band that called people to action, threatened the establishment, and defined the late 1970s and early 1980s with the sounds of punk. They were known as The Clash, made up of Joe Strummer, Mick Jones, Paul Simonon and Topper Headon. They were rock-n-roll heroes to many young people in the U.K. and only second to The Jam in terms of popularity. Their intensely Marxist and left wing message was both fiery and idealistic. Their musical sound was adventurous and they were the first band to mix punk with reggae, rap and rockabilly. The Clash gave punk a purpose, and unlike the Sex Pistols who were nihilistic, The Clash saw it as their responsibility to call their fans and listeners to both question authority and to a higher cause. Their music captured the turmoil of the times with a raw power and conviction. The Clash were in every way rebels with a cause.

Throughout this paper I hope to give brief biographies of each band member up until they joined The Clash, a brief history of the band including their political and social outlooks and finally analyze the lyrics to four songs by The Clash and delve into the deeper historical and political messages behind their lyrics.

## **Joe Strummer**

For the Clash to have such revolutionary songs and ideologies, they surprisingly had traditional family roots. Joe’s father was a clerical officer in the Foreign Office and extremely conservative. Joe’s family were middle class, and considering The Clash’s later attitudes and statements about the class system, he’d be criticized for the rest of his



life for being a poseur. Joe was born as John Mellor in Turkey on August 20, 1952. His father had been stationed in Turkey and the family moved around the world numerous times. They lived in Cairo until the Suez Crisis, Mexico City and then West Germany. Joe's early childhood experiences certainly set the stage for the politically charged songs and leftish stance that The Clash would take.

Joe admitted that the constant moving around as a child always made him feel like an outsider and had no real place to call home. "I had a life moving around different places. In Mexico, I even went to a Spanish-speaking school for two years. In every situation we were freaks. I'd had an eye and earful of some very strange places. I saw some very weird things as a child."<sup>1</sup>

When Joe's family finally moved back to Britain in 1960, he didn't feel very much at home there either. Along with his older brother, David, the boys were sent to boarding school and rarely saw their parents. One good thing did happen to Joe in boarding school though, and that was the discovery of rock music.<sup>2</sup> Joe felt that rock music was freedom and an escape from the rigid school and life he had always known. He may have never felt at home anywhere, but he soon learned that music helped him feel accepted in some way. This may help to explain Joe's ability later on to not identify solely as British. He was an outsider in the best possible way. Joe could see injustice

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<sup>1</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth J. Bindas, *The Future is Unwritten: The Clash, Punk and America, 1977-1982* (American Studies, Vol. 34, No. 1: Spring 1993), 70.

without being blindsided by a nationalistic bias, which would later be crucial in understanding the political messages The Clash were trying to get across in their music.

Joe's musical taste was not only confined to white rock music either. On one particular trip to Tehran to visit his parents in 1965 he bought a Chuck Berry record, which he would hold among his most valuable possessions for years to come. Chuck Berry opened Joe up to a whole new and exciting world of music – R&B and the Blues. He soon got into Bo Diddley, Elmore James and numerous other R&B stars. Blues had a certain emotional pull on Joe, as he felt lonely, abandoned and a bit lost. Later in The Clash's career they would tour with Bo Diddley and Joe would finally be able to meet his hero (figure 1).



**The Clash meet Bo Diddley, the Pearl Harbor tour bus, February 1979.**

The summer of 1968 had a huge impact on him as he watched from his dorm TV; “The whole world was exploding! Paris, Vietnam, Grosvenor Square. We took it all as normal because there was no other frame of reference.”<sup>3</sup> The arrival of rock and the unrest in numerous parts of the world seemed to go hand and hand to Joe. He watched as Communists fought with the police on TV and a revolutionary spirit started to stir within him.

Unfortunately Joe was stuck in his dormitory when all this was happening just a few miles away in Central London. There was a sense that he was missing out on everything important. The 1960s ended as Edward Heath brought the Tories back into power and Joe remembered missing some of his favorite bands, “By the time I reached London the whole thing was over. Which was a bit regretful. I never did get to see The Stones, The Beatles, The Kinks, The Yardbirds...”<sup>4</sup>

Undoubtedly one of the most tragic events of Joe’s early life was the death of his older brother, David. He had committed suicide and was found in Regent’s Park. Joe would only reveal what kind of occult and extreme right-wing politics his brother was into to journalist Caroline Coon in 1977, “No. I did have [a brother] but he's dead. He committed suicide in 1971. He was a year older than me. Funnily enough, you know, he was a Nazi. He was a member of the National Front. He was into the occult and he used to have these deaths-heads and cross-bones all over everything. He didn't like to talk to

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<sup>3</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 11.

anybody, and I think suicide was the only way out for him.”<sup>5</sup> One has to wonder how much of Joe’s own personal leftist political views were a reaction and antidote to his brother’s harmful right wing beliefs.

After the death of his brother Joe completely reinvented himself. He grew his hair long and started going by the name ‘Woody’ in homage to Woody Guthrie the American folk singer, most famously known to carry around a guitar with the words, “This guitar kills fascists” on it. He also began to exaggerate his past and create an air of mysteriousness around himself, something he would take much further in The Clash.

Woody soon started busking near the tube stations, playing Chuck Berry songs. He played late into the night when tips were good because so many people left the pubs drunk. The downside was that violence often erupted, but Joe later explained, “Somehow the fact you were defenseless down there always protected you.”<sup>6</sup> The idea that you couldn’t fight violence with violence, a point The Clash always reiterated, was something that young Joe was experiencing first hand while busking.

Joe first became highly political after his black roommate was kicked out of their squat for his race. “I arrived back at the flat and there was this police car outside, and all our stuff was being thrown out the window. Me and Tymon had found this black guy in the park who’d given us a fright, and being hippies we invited him back to our place to live. As soon as the landlord found out there was a black guy in the house he starting

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<sup>5</sup> Caroline Coon, “Joe Strummer Interview – 26<sup>th</sup>. March 1977,” 1988: *The New Wave Punk Rock Explosion*. Accessed 10 March 2012; available from Black Market Clash, <<http://www.blackmarketclash.com>>.

<sup>6</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 19.

nicking people's giros. Then we were all evicted: a gang of toughs rushed in, beat everybody up, slung 'em out. [The landlord] bunged the cops a few quid. It was then I started learning what justice was and wasn't."<sup>7</sup>

A couple of weeks later, while at the home of hippy activists and friends, they were also illegally evicted. Joe tried to take the case to court but was kicked out for losing his temper as the law students in the back of the courtroom took notes. Joe saw his struggle in black and white, Marxist vs. Capitalist terms, "I've been fucked up the arse by the capitalist system!"<sup>8</sup> During the harsh eviction his entire record collection had been destroyed as well. Just as Joe and Tymon's black friend had been evicted and devalued due to his race, a record collection that placed great value on Chuck Berry and R&B had been unceremoniously discarded. Joe took the entire situation beyond personal terms and was angered at the injustices he saw around him.

## **Paul Simonon**

Growing up Paul never saw himself in music. If anything his future was pointing towards art and painting specifically. "I started painting when I was a baby. My father was a Sunday painter and I followed on from him. He only painted on Sundays because he worked the rest of the week. That was it, I was going to be a painter and I directed all

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<sup>7</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 20.

<sup>8</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 21.

my energies into painting and drawing.”<sup>9</sup> With his passion for art it is only appropriate that he is the source of one of the most famous rock-n-roll photographs ever taken. Pennie Smith’s famous photograph of Paul about to smash his bass against the stage floor is in many ways symbolic of The Clash but also the personality and style of Paul Simonon. “I used to whack lumps out of the body, much to the amusement of the roadies. It was, “Here comes Paul with his new bass, better get the hammer ready.” I used to chip bits out of it, just to give it some life. I hated the bloody things. I wanted to be a guitarist like Pete Townsend, not a bass-player. But playing guitar was a mystery for me at that time.”<sup>10</sup>.

Growing up, Paul remembered vividly the stories his father, Antony Simonon use to tell him about his time in Kenya. In the 1950s he was posted in Kenya and witnessed the Mau Mau rebellion, one of the most horrific post-colonial scenes in Britain’s history. During the crisis British soldiers tortured the Mau Mau rebels, placed them in concentration camps, and hanged those deemed the most grievous offenders. It had a deep effect on Paul’s father, and he made sure his son knew of the horrors that the military was capable of doing.<sup>11</sup>

Paul’s family settled in Brixton in 1959 and Paul grew up witnessing the turmoil and tensions of south London where the West Indians and police often fought (he used this later as inspiration for Guns of Brixton). Paul and his younger brother, Nick remember

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<sup>9</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 48.

<sup>10</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 49.

<sup>11</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 51.

growing up and getting into lots of mischief. He comments in *Westway to the World* that, “My mum said I could throw a birthday party one year and could invite some mates over. So I did and I remember looking around the table at my mates and they were all black.”<sup>12</sup> From an early age, Paul loved the Caribbean and black cultures that surrounded the London neighborhood they lived in.

Along with his father’s numerous military stories, his passion for art, and his own fascination with war movies, perhaps this can explain his later obsession with military garb and imagery in The Clash. It was Paul who was always responsible for the “look” of The Clash. “It was a skinhead-Mod thing. You dressed to intimidate or for people to leave you alone. I thought we needed that attention to detail when it came to clothes.

It was like when we splashed paint on our gear, I realized you had to be careful with that: Joe and Mick went a bit over the top. I remember us walking down Golborne Road and all these West Indians were pointing at us, going, “Hahahaha!” I discreetly did the shirt and maybe the shoes, but the others had the shirt, the trousers, the socks, the jackets. You have to have a bit of style, you can’t go at it like a lunatic.”<sup>13</sup>

According to Paul and close friends of The Clash, everything was done for a reason. Don Letts, The Clash’s video maker comments, “It was straightforward to be honest. Paul Simonon either likes this or he doesn’t like this. But there is always some moral or intellectual idea behind it. He just had an idea instinctively of what The Clash

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<sup>12</sup> Don Letts, Director, *Westway to the World*, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 49.



were about. They are about this, and they are not about that. Paul was essentially The Clash's musical and cultural barometer. He's silent but deadly.”<sup>14</sup>

Paul's parents eventually got divorced as he and his brother were approaching their teenage years. Their mother moved to Siena for a time and took her sons along for part of the school year. Whereas Paul's father was disciplined, his mother was more relaxed and they often played hooky, avoiding all forms of authority if they could. Like Joe, Paul started to feel like the constant “new boy.” Many friends of The Clash describe Paul as cautious and even shy at times, which was probably because of the back and forth lifestyle he was living with each parent. He eventually turned into a skinhead (without the right wing politics usually associated with the movement) as he hit his teenage years. It was a movement and street fashion that had merged out of the earlier Mod scene of the 1950s and early 1960s. Paul started attending more ska and reggae music shows and then later at night along with his mates, they'd “do a bit of robbing” as he says in *Westway to the World* with a mischievous smirk.<sup>15</sup>

Before long however the skinhead movement became heavily linked to violence and ironically enough racism, even though Paul and many of his other skinhead friends were listening to a lot of reggae and black music. Paul was never caught up in the racism and “Paki-bashing” as he calls it, but that didn't keep him out of street fights between skinheads and Teddy boys.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 50.

<sup>15</sup> Don Letts, Director, *Westway to the World*, 2000.

<sup>16</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 55.



When Paul was living with his father, he was forced to work and do chores, a much more strict lifestyle than when living with his mother in Italy. His father by now had joined the Communist Party and made Paul go around Golborne Road handing out pro Communist literature. Paul would later remark that he was the least political member of The Clash, but he still always thanked his father for the introduction into politics and the stricter lifestyle he opposed on him.

## **Mick Jones**

One crucial theme that seems to run through the members of The Clash is that all of them, excluding Topper, had fathers who had served in the British military or government in some way. Mick Jones' father, Thomas had served in the armed forces during World War II and then later posted to the newly created state of Israel. All of their fathers had been part of a generation of Englishmen who were left to pick up the pieces of the falling British Empire, post war. "He saw some pretty terrible things out there," says Mick. "What they did to the locals. It changed his view about things. He came back here and married a Jewish woman!"<sup>17</sup>

Mick also grew up in south London not far from Brixton. In fact he and Paul probably lived twenty minutes from each other growing up, yet never crossed paths until later in their teens. His parents divorced when he was eight and he spent most of his childhood with his grandmother, Stella. From a young age music was a big part of the

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<sup>17</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 30.

household. Mick would spend hours in front of the family's radiogram entranced with the music of The Beatles, Hendrix and Cream. His first concert was a free show in Hyde Park featuring The Nice, Traffic, Junior's Eyes and The Pretty Things. He's claimed since then, that that defining show made him want to be in a rock-n-roll band.

Like Joe and Paul, Mick also had no real interest in the strict predominantly white school he went to. In the late 1960s Mick and his mates often skipped out on classes to go see Pink Floyd, Tyrannosaurus Rex, The Stones and Led Zeppelin. Mick's way of rebelling at school involved wearing the tightest leather trousers and having the longest hair. In 1968 Mick and his grandmother moved from Brixton closer to the Hyde Park area of London. Mick often missed his parents but his grandmother and plenty of other elderly ladies doted on him constantly, so he was not without love. He was certainly pampered and a bit spoiled by his grandmother to make up for his parents' absence. Later in The Clash Mick was always accused of being the "diva" and too forceful in getting what he wanted, when he wanted it.

He's also been criticized for being far too upper class to be acting like he came from the middle class, while in The Clash. He would later never mention the Hyde Park address he and his grandmother used, but instead only focused on the south London address as the place he grew up.<sup>18</sup> The Clash's manager, Bernie Rhodes and other friends definitely considered Mick to be middle class. However, Sebastian Conran, who sometimes designed clothes for The Clash commented, "The fact that Mick went on to art

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<sup>18</sup> Marcus Gray, *Last Gang In Town: The Story and Myth of The Clash* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 35.

school and higher education, and was a bright guy, meant there was a certain amount of denial about his background.”<sup>19</sup>

The different class attitudes in Britain have always been a headache for musicians and anyone who gains even a small amount of fame in the country. John Lennon used to get accused for singing “Working-Class Hero” because he didn’t fit the definition of working class.<sup>20</sup> Mick Jones upbringing may have been a bit more posh than the other members of The Clash, but undoubtedly it was still a turbulent time for him as he often missed his parents. Mick’s higher class upbringing also didn’t necessarily have a negative impact on him. Mick was introduced to music and performing music at a much younger age than the rest of the members, causing him to be the most seasoned musician of the bunch. As Joe would later comment, Paul and he were the performers and Mick and Topper the musicians.

In 1974 Mick and his friend, John Browne started forming a band called, The Delinquents. During that summer Mick also worked as a clerical assistant in the Department of Health and Social Security in Paddington. Later in The Clash he would comment on how appalling the treatment of black and Irish workers claiming benefits were. He described the staff in a letter to a friend as, “utter morons who treat me badly... they have no rock-n-roll in their life.” Mick’s job soon got worse as the IRA bombed Birmingham, Manchester and London’s Westminster Hall in July. The treatment of Irish workers claiming benefits got even worse and violence would break out at work. Part of

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<sup>19</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 34.

<sup>20</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 35.

the IRA's campaign that summer was to send letter bombs to government offices as well.<sup>21</sup> One of Mick's jobs was to open the mail, a scene later alluded to in The Clash's song, Career Opportunities, "I hate the army, an' I hate the R.A.F., I don't wanna go fighting in the tropical heat, I hate the civil service rules, and I won't open letter bombs for you."<sup>22</sup>

If Mick's job hadn't been horrible enough, his newly formed band, The Delinquents wasn't looking too promising either. After a few weeks of rehearsing and practicing the other members asked Mick to leave. Everyone agreed that Mick took the sacking with immense dignity. To be betrayed and backstabbed by people who he considered his friends was a tough hit to recover from. Instead of becoming vengeful and bitter however, the first thing Mick went out and did was buy himself a better guitar. He then spent basically every free hour that he had at his grandmother's practicing all of The Stones and New York Dolls songs. He was determined that he would make it as a rock-n-roll star, if only by the sheer talent and hard work he was willing to put in.

## **Topper Headon**

Topper Headon didn't join The Clash until much later. He originally auditioned in November of 1975, but passed after he learned he wouldn't get 25 pounds a week. The auditions that year were legendary as many future punk musicians also auditioned. Even Morrissey supposedly wrote to them about trying out and they threw his letter away

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<sup>21</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 43.

<sup>22</sup> The Clash, "Career Opportunities," *The Clash*, 1977, Epic.

assuming that someone from Manchester knew nothing about what they were about or rock-n-roll!

Previously manager Bernie Rhodes had almost assembled The Clash as what he thought of as his own Sex Pistols. He had been friends with Malcolm McLaren who established the Pistols and he knew that a new and exciting scene was stirring in London.<sup>23</sup> “You knew straight away that was it, and this was what it was going to be like from now on. It was a new scene, new values—so different from what had happened before. A bit dangerous.”<sup>24</sup>

Mick was hanging out with Bernie and trying to find a singer when Paul and his friend showed up. Paul’s friend had come in to audition but they were more interested in Paul just because of his strikingly good looks and cool persona and air that he gave off. Paul eventually joined the band on bass even though he was the most musically rusty of the group. He had focused so much on painting growing up that he hadn’t really performed music, instead just loved listening to reggae and ska when he could. Terry Chimes played drums and Keith Levene was also on guitar.

Bernie and Mick were on the look out for a singer. They had spotted Joe singing with **The 101s** in pubs and bars that year and knew that he was the man for the job. Joe also sensed that something new was happening in music and he wasn’t going to get

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<sup>23</sup> Caroline Coon, “Joe Strummer Interview – 26<sup>th</sup>. March 1977,” *1988: The New Wave Punk Rock Explosion*. Accessed 10 March 2012; available from Black Market Clash, <<http://www.blackmarketclash.com>>.

<sup>24</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 78.

anywhere playing pub rock. He took Bernie's and Mick's offer and joined the band within 48 hours of their initial proposition. Paul also came up with the name of the band around this time, "It really came to my head when I started reading the newspapers and a word that kept recurring was the word 'clash', so I thought 'The Clash, what about that,' to the others. And they and Bernard, they went for it."<sup>25</sup>

The band began recording their debut album only after a month of practicing with Joe. After the initial recordings Terry Chimes left the band and that's why only Joe, Paul and Mick are featured on the debut's cover art. In 1977 The Clash were looking for a permanent drummer again. Mick bumped into Nick (Topper) Headon at a bar and convinced him to come and try out again. Topper's parents were both Welsh (which also gave him a bit of an outsider status) and he, like Mick grew up around a lot of music. Both his parents were musical and played piano as well as sang. He inherited his parent's love and talent for music. His father was the school headmaster and ironically he also misbehaved a lot in school. He later worked a year as a shipping clerk and then moved to London to marry his girlfriend. Topper joined a band for a short time but then was later sacked for being too small and not hitting the drums hard enough. When he joined The Clash at the age of twenty-one, he knew that he wouldn't make that mistake again. "With The Clash I knew exactly what they wanted," says Topper. "I thought, 'whatever happens I'm going to knock shit out of those drums.'" As a result, I had to re-learn my style."<sup>26</sup>

The Clash were impressed immediately once again with Topper's talent. He was given the job and the full punk makeover. Paul gave him the nickname, Topper, based on

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<sup>25</sup> Kurt Loder, Presenter, *MTV Rockumentary: The Clash*, 1991.

<sup>26</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 78.



a Topper kids comic whose character's ears stuck out. Topper himself had no plans to stick around very long with The Clash. He thought he could make a name for himself and then go on to do something more musically interesting. He admitted early on that he thought of abandoning the group, "That whole Clash violence thing... Paul could look after himself, but me and Mick weren't fighters. Joe would much rather talk himself out of an argument than fight with anyone. The situation was new to me. It was really confusing. I felt quite alone. I lay there thinking, "I don't really know any of these people." I was scared. I thought, "Shall I do a runner while I've got the chance?" But I didn't of course."<sup>27</sup>

## **Punk with a Purpose**

Punk music arose in England during the mid to late 1970s as the country's postwar prosperity was drying up and paving the way for inevitable political chaos under the Thatcher years. Unemployment (over 2 million in 1975), oil prices, inflation (over 20%) and poverty were all on the rise and social service programs were shrinking. During hard economic times, social situations became rough as well. Racism and xenophobia became more commonplace as people competed heavily for jobs. A large portion of the English youth felt disillusioned and frustrated with their society and country. Many

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<sup>27</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 153.

young people turned to music as a way of expression and punk rock seemed the most appropriate genre for the era.<sup>28</sup>

Punk rock music created a whole counterculture throughout the 1970s and 1980s that inspired young people to take a stand against the establishment. Punk rock was rooted in the working classes and proletariat, it was usually nihilistic, anarchistic and at times violent. The sound of the music was loud, aggressive, and usually involved simple melodies and a fast tempo. It was meant to be the exact opposite of the passive hippy movement a decade earlier in the 1960s and devoid of the “pretentiousness” of glam rock as well. Journalist Caroline Coon described the punk scene as crucial to what the youth of England needed at the moment, “those tough militaristic songs were what we needed as we went into Thatcherism.”<sup>29</sup>

Most punks saw the world in a pessimistic way where capitalism and huge corporations had destroyed humanity.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, most punk groups made it a point to not sign with big record labels. Even though The Clash did sign with CBS for a record deal, (in which they were criticized for as selling out) they did so still holding the view that capitalism was an apparent evil. As Joe Strummer says in the semi-documentary film, *Rude Boy*, “Like in Russia it’s exactly the same as it was before they had the revolution. Just a new load of people driving around in blacked out cars. And all the other people are walkin’ just the same as before... Why I think the left wing is better than the

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<sup>28</sup> Kenneth J. Bindas, *The Future is Unwritten: The Clash, Punk and America, 1977-1982* (American Studies, Vol. 34, No. 1: Spring 1993), 84.

<sup>29</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 153.

<sup>30</sup> Kenneth J. Bindas, *The Future is Unwritten: The Clash, Punk and America, 1977-1982* (American Studies, Vol. 34, No. 1: Spring 1993), 71.



right wing is because at least it's kind of not just for the few. The many slaving for the few. What's the point of becoming one of the few?... I think that there's nothing there. You can get all the Rolls Royces, all the dough, all the country houses, all the servants you want and I just think there's nothing at the end of that road. No humor, life or nothing. And that's just why I don't want to go that way and that's why I think that it's all of us or none. It's nothing there. I'm sure of it.”<sup>31</sup>

The Clash were a very left wing punk band, however not all were. In fact the majority of punk groups mostly identified with the right or were apolitical. The Sex Pistols and Siouxsie Sioux are the two most obvious examples in punk, as both groups dealt heavily with Nazi imagery for shock value. For example, Siouxsie Sioux use to wear a Swastika wristband on stage and Sid Vicious was always spotted wearing a Swastika t-shirt. However it can be debated as to whether those groups actually had fascist and Nazi beliefs or if it was more just a way to gain attention. Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood, both helped shape the image of the Sex Pistols more than anyone else. They both also use to run a provocative punk clothing shop simply called, SEX. John Lydon better known by his stage name, Johnny Rotten later said, “Malcolm and Vivienne were really a pair of shysters: they would sell anything to any trend that they could grab onto.”<sup>32</sup>

The Clash were also tremendously shaped by their manager, Bernie Rhodes. However, in a much different way. Bernie's strategy was to create an aura of mystery around the band as well as encourage them to write political songs. Strummer and Jones

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<sup>31</sup> Jack Hazen and David Mingay, Directors, *Rude Boy*, 1980.

<sup>32</sup> John Robb, *Punk Rock: An Oral History* (London: Ebury Press, 2006).

became a great songwriting pair, as Joe's lyrics were ideological and political, filling songs with that hostile attitude that was original to punk. Mick's lyrics could also be political but more so in a romantic way. Joe was able to write songs with statements and Mick made them feel personal and intimate.

The Clash also felt that they were in a position to target racism because they started incorporating reggae into their music. At first the band was hesitant to include it, they were sensitive to the fact that it was the voice of London's black community and they did not want to misappropriate it. The members of The Clash were in fact sincere and passionate about their love of reggae, but wanted to go about it in the correct way. Paul had grown up in a predominately black part of London and loved reggae so much that he felt it was an essential part of his life.

What makes combining punk and reggae such an act of genius is that both genres have a sense of urgency and purpose that other genres may lack. Reggae had been used in Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean as protest songs for generations.<sup>33</sup> If The Clash could combine both punk and reggae they would have a very powerful sound that could speak for both white and black people. Not only would The Clash mesh punk and reggae, but later would be the first white band to be inspired by rap (which in 1980 was still a very new genre of music).

There was no doubt that The Clash would alienate some of their previous punk following by being so anti-racist. Great Britain in the late 1970s and early 1980s was still very much a racist country. In 1958 there was a significant race riot in Notting Hill after a

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<sup>33</sup> Piero Scaruffi, *A History of Popular Music before Rock Music* (Omniware Publishers, 2002), 78.

white woman and her black husband were caught fighting in public. Ever since then the area had been tense. By the 1970s things had gotten much worse as extremist right wing political groups were gaining momentum. The two most notable groups were The National Front and the British Movement, both of which The Clash would protest against (figure 2). Many black and Middle Eastern neighborhoods were continually harassed and discriminated against, while police brutality was the norm.<sup>34</sup>



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<sup>34</sup> Alan Travis, "After 44 years secret papers reveal truth about five nights of violence in Notting Hill," *The Guardian*, 24 August 2002. Accessed 27 February 2012. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2002/aug/24/artsandhumanities.nottinghillcarnival2002>>.

Race riots broke again in Notting Hill in August of 1976. It all began at the Carnival that was held yearly to celebrate West Indian culture in Britain. The Clash's video-maker, Don Letts remembers the day vividly as he was the son of West Indians who migrated to Brixton in the 1960s. "It is interesting how people look back on it as a black and white riot. It wasn't. It was a wrong verses right riot. It wasn't the black kids against the white police, it was the youth at a black festival against the police. Don't forget this is 1976 and you are talking about a time when the country is in a bit of a state, there are no opportunities, there is a depression, recession, a lot of unemployment. Then you have all this "SUS" stuff going on (SUS meaning suspicious, referring to the act that police officers would regularly search racial minorities if they suspected they were carrying a weapon. This usually was just used as a way of harassing minorities even further).<sup>35</sup>

Paul, Joe and Bernie also happened to be at the Carnival that day. The whole riot took off when a black youth was arrested for pick pocketing and other black youths stood up to the police who were handling him too roughly. Once the riot was underway, Joe and Paul found themselves in the middle of it and decided to join in by throwing bricks at police officers. Even though the riot consisted of mixed youths against the police, Paul and Joe were still cornered in an alley by a group of black youths and told to empty out

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<sup>35</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 100.

their pockets. The situation added a complexity to the whole affair as Paul says, “We realized it wasn’t our story.”<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, the incident had a profound impact on both Joe and Paul. While growing up they had both felt anger towards the brutality of police officers. After the Notting Hill riots they saw themselves as street fighters of some kind. The Clash then started to play with militant and outlaw imagery. Whether it be in their songs, their fashion or in their interviews, they found it appealing to present themselves as a type of gang that was out for the protection and rights of everyone.

“White Riot” was also born out of that fateful day at Notting Hill. The lyrics, “black people gotta lot a problems, but they don’t mind throwing a brick, white people go to school, where they teach you how to be thick!”<sup>37</sup> were a call to action to the white youths of England. The Clash urged them to wake up and riot for what they believed in as well, instead of being passive. There’s a small bit of envy in the song as well, “white riot – I wanna riot, white riot – a riot of the my own.” This probably nods back to the fact that even though Joe and Paul felt a strong connection to the black London community, they could never be truly a part of it.

“White Riot” often got a lot of slack as well because of the violent effect it had on the crowd. Later in The Clash’s career Mick would refuse to play the song as he hated how easily fights in the audience would break out during it. Joe always insisted that The Clash themselves were not supporting violence but simply commenting and describing

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<sup>36</sup> Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 101.

<sup>37</sup> The Clash, “White Riot,” *The Clash*, 1977, Epic.



the violence they saw around them. “Our music’s violent – we’re not. When we wrote about ‘White Riot,’ we imagined what was gonna hit on us. I imagined having a knife pointed at me, right? But people took it to mean that WE had them and we were pointing the knife at other people,” said Joe in 1978.<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately, the band were forever fighting back and forth with their record label CBS. CBS hadn’t let them release the first Clash album in the United States because it was considered to be too crude. The label also didn’t promote the band properly at all. Now that they had signed with CBS they saw themselves being censored in every way possible. In order to get their music out there The Clash tried to sell their music at an extremely low price. *London Calling* was a double album in 1980 and they sold it for the price of a single. A year later in 1981 they sold the triple album *Sandinista!* at a lower price than a typical double album. The band also made sure to sell concert tickets and merchandise for almost nothing. They saw this as the only way they could offset the capitalist game that they were now thrown into. In order to make these goals happen the band had to give up their royalties. Paul still insists that CBS refused to promote *Sandinista!* as a way of punishing the band for being so difficult.

When *London Calling* was released the band were criticized for selling out as they became increasingly popular in 1979 and 1980. The British press started a love/hate relationship with the group and often took stabs at Joe’s middle class family background. Paul and Mick both had art school roots and some punk purists criticized that as well, stating that they were singing about revolution and political change when none of the

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<sup>38</sup> Mikal Gilmore, “The Clash: Anger On The Left” *Rolling Stone*, 8 March 1979, p. 74.

members themselves had truly had a hard life. Their critics labeled them as being both fake and opportunistic.

Mick sincerely believed that if the band could become bigger, then their political message could reach more people and have a larger impact worldwide. "We realized that if we were a little more subtle, if we branched out a little, we might reach more people. We saw that we had just been reaching the same people over and over. And the music-- just bang, bang, bang--was getting to be like a nagging wife. This way, if more kids hear the records, then maybe they'll start humming the songs. And if they start humming the songs, maybe they'll read the lyrics and get something from them."<sup>39</sup>

Joe insisted that the songs on *London Calling* were anything but tame as well. Highlights of the album include "Clampdown", which addressed the failure of the capitalist system and linked it with fascism. "Clampdown" is a song that is still poignant today as it urges young people to not live a conformist lifestyle where you're caught up in a pointless job, debt and simply "working for the man."<sup>40</sup>

Paul related to the song immensely and connected it to the opportunities that were available to him after school. "What was worse was that when it got time for us to start leaving school, they took us out on trips to give us an idea of what jobs were available. But they didn't try to introduce us to anything exciting or meaningful. They took us to the power station and the Navy yards. It was like saying, 'This is all you guys could ever do.'

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<sup>39</sup> James Henke, "There'll Be Dancing In The Streets: The Clash." *Rolling Stone*, 3 April 1980, p. 38-41.

<sup>40</sup> Kenneth J. Bindas, *The Future is Unwritten: The Clash, Punk and America, 1977-1982* (American Studies, Vol. 34, No. 1: Spring 1993), 75.

Some of the kids fell for it. When we got taken down to the Navy yards, we went on a ship and got cooked up dinner and it was all chips and beans. It was really great. So some of the kids joined up - because the food was better than they ate at home.”<sup>41</sup>

“The Guns of Brixton” was Paul’s moment on the record as it was his first attempt at singing. Just as “White Riot” was based off the Notting Hill riots, Paul was inspired by the racial tensions he felt growing up in Brixton. By far the most reggae influenced track on the album Paul sings, “When they kick at your front door, how you gonna come? With your hands on your head or on the trigger of your gun? You can crush us, you can bruise us, but you’ll have to answer to, oh-the guns of Brixton.”<sup>42</sup> The song serves as a type of foreshadowing to the riots that would take place in Brixton later in 1985.

The biggest hit from *London Calling* was “Train in Vain” written by Mick Jones as a type of love song. Joe was frustrated that their biggest hit to date was a love song and not a political song, but nonetheless “Train in Vain” opened The Clash up to America in a way that they hadn’t been before.

*Sandinista!* quickly followed as the next LP. The band were surprised their record company let them get away with the title as it was named after the Communist Nicaraguan regime. At the time Joe had high hopes for the future of Nicaragua, claiming that the Sandinista struggle was one of right vs. wrong. Ten years later the album title

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Hilburn, “Clash make it good,” *Los Angeles Times*, 22 January 1984.

<sup>42</sup> The Clash, “The Guns of Brixton,” *London Calling*, 1979, Epic.



seemed confusing and the message was lost on listeners as political scandals, crimes and civil war still raged on in Nicaragua.

The Clash began to move past British shores as lyrics now explored the evils of the Reagan administration and U.S. intervention abroad. The album was recorded in London, New York and Jamaica and fused elements of reggae, gospel, folk, dub, blues, rockabilly and jazz. Highlights included “Career Opportunities”, which once again attacked the lack of jobs available in England. “Washington Bullets” was Joe’s simplified version of Latin American history. The song also served as a criticism towards the recent injustices that Communist countries had committed, most notably the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan. “Ivan Meets G.I. Joe” was similar as it also was full of political commentary about the U.S. and Russia during the Cold War, with a nod to China at the end.

The album *Combat Rock* followed soon after. By this point there was some internal division in the band and Topper Headon left due to his heroin addiction. The rest of the band covered for him at the time by saying he left because of exhaustion and political differences. In *Westway to the World* Topper apologizes for his addiction and admits that if he had kept it together himself, the band probably would of lasted longer.<sup>43</sup>

Topper’s last contribution to The Clash was adding drums, bass and piano to “Rock The Casbah.” The tune satirizes Iran’s ban on western music and also serves as another dig at CBS for still trying to censor the band. Some of the most political songs on *Combat Rock* didn’t receive airplay. “Know Your Rights” criticizes democracies who

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<sup>43</sup> Don Letts, Director, *Westway to the World*, 2000.

still try to censor their people, "know your rights! all three of `em: Number three! You have the right to free speech, as long as you're not dumb enough to actually try it!"<sup>44</sup>

Once again, one of Mick's love songs (or love gone bad) became a huge hit as "Should I Stay Or Should I Go" went to be the band's only number one single on the UK singles charts.<sup>45</sup> There has since always been speculation that Mick was singing about his impending dismissal from the band, but Mick claims that was never the case.

After *Combat Rock* Mick was sacked by Joe for being too difficult to work with any longer. Now with only Joe and Paul left, they recruited three new members and in 1985 released their last studio album titled, *Cut The Crap* before disbanding. Mick went on to form a new band called Big Audio Dynamite in 1984. Joe wrote several movie scores and played a few small acting roles as well. He also filled in for the London-Irish folk / punk band The Pogues for a brief time from 1987-1988. Paul led the band Havana 3 A.M. for a brief period of time before returning to his first love of painting.<sup>46</sup>

Now that we have a background on the individual members of The Clash and an understanding about the band's history and ideologies, I'd like to take a closer look at the lyrics to four particular songs and further interpret the political and historical meanings behind them.

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<sup>44</sup> The Clash, "Know Your Rights," *Combat Rock*, 1982, Epic.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Dixon, "The Cultural Diffusion of Punk Rock in the United States." *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. VI, No. 3 (1979).

<sup>46</sup> Simon and Schuster, "The Clash: Biography," *Rolling Stone*, 2001, p. 6.

## “Spanish Bombs”

“The hillsides ring with “Free the people”  
Or can I hear the echo from the days of '39?  
With trenches full of poets  
The ragged army, fixin' bayonets to fight the other line  
Spanish bombs rock the province  
I'm hearing music from another time  
Spanish bombs on the Costa Brava  
I'm flying in on a DC 10 tonight”<sup>47</sup>

The idea for “Spanish Bombs” came to Joe in two ways. One was during the first week of the Wessex recording sessions for *London Calling* when he was on his way home with his girlfriend at the time, Gaby Salter. They took a taxi home from the studio and on the taxi driver’s radio there was news of a bombing done by a Basque separatist group called Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA for short) meaning Basque Homeland and Freedom. The bombing that Joe heard on the radio happened on July 29, 1979 when the Madrid airport and two railroad lines were bombed at the same time. Apparently inspiration hit Joe and he turned to Gaby telling her there should be a song called Spanish Bombs.<sup>48</sup>

The other idea came from The Spanish Civil War. In 1931 Spain abolished its monarchy and officially became a republic. There was violence between right and left wing factions however, as the left-wing People’s Front won the general election in 1936. A coup d’etat took later in 1936 as General Francisco Franco of the right wing

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<sup>47</sup> The Clash, “Spanish Bombs,” *London Calling*, 1979, Epic.

<sup>48</sup> Marcus Gray, *Route 19 Revisited: The Clash and London Calling* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2010), 242-243

Nationalist movement took power. Problems escalated after the killing of a famous poet, Federico Garcia Lorca by the Nationalists. Civil war broke out with the Nationalists being backed by Fascist Germany and Italy and the International Brigades (left wing sympathizers mostly made up of volunteers from numerous countries) backed the People's Front. The Nationalists won with Franco establishing a dictatorship that lasted until his death in 1975.<sup>49</sup>

Much opposition to Franco came from the Basque people who were indigenous to the north of Spain. They wanted to be their own country as they felt they were a people apart. Hence the ETA was formed by the most radical and militant of the Basque people. They set about bombing transportation and tourism sites in Spain.<sup>50</sup>

Eric Blair, better known by his pen name George Orwell, was one British volunteer who went to fight for the People's Front. Joe told Melody Maker in 1988, "I got the song from reading Orwell and people like that."<sup>51</sup> Also the lyrics, "Fredrico Lorca is dead and gone, Bullet holes in the cemetery walls," and "With trenches full of poets" are both nods to the poet Lorca whose work was banned in Spain until 1975.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Bolloren Burnett, *The Spanish Revolution. The Left and the Struggle for Power during the Civil War*, (University of North Carolina, 1979), 34-98.

<sup>50</sup> Bolloren Burnett, *The Spanish Revolution. The Left and the Struggle for Power during the Civil War*, (University of North Carolina, 1979), 108.

<sup>51</sup> Ann Scanlon, "Joe Strummer Interview, 1988," *Melody Maker*, 1988, Accessed 6 April 2012; available from Louder than War, <<http://louderthanwar.com/joe-strummer-interviewed-in-1988-by-ann-scanlon/>>

<sup>52</sup> Marcus Gray, *Route 19 Revisited: The Clash and London Calling* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2010), 244.

The lyrics, “Back home the buses went up in flashes. The Irish tomb was drenched in blood, Spanish bombs shatter the hotels” was a connection Joe made between the ETA and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) back home in England. London landmarks, busses and hotels had also been attacked with bombings. Joe’s lyrics were more significant than ever as later in 1979, IRA bombs killed a conservative MP and 18 soldiers.<sup>53</sup>

Lastly, the chorus shows some of Joe’s bad Spanish as he claimed he attended a Spanish speaking school in Mexico for a year as a child but had forgotten most of it. “Vo te quiero infinito yo te acuerda oh mi corazon” roughly translate to “I love you infinitely. I remember you oh my heart.” The last idea for Spanish bombs came in the form of a sort of love song to his old girlfriend Palmolive from The Slits. She had been born and raised in Andalucia, the most southern part of Spain. Joe cheats a bit here, having promised that he would never write a love song for The Clash.

### **“Straight To Hell”**

“Can you really cough it up loud and strong,  
The immigrants  
They wanna sing all night long  
It could be anywhere  
Most likely could be any frontier  
Any hemisphere  
No man's land and there ain't no asylum here  
King Solomon he never lived round here”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Marcus Gray, *Route 19 Revisited: The Clash and London Calling* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2010), 245.

<sup>54</sup> The Clash, “Straight To Hell,” *Combat Rock*, 1982, Epic.

Straight To Hell is a criticism of the United States and their policy towards children who were fathered by American soldiers and Vietnamese mothers during the Vietnam War. The term Amerasian was coined by the writer, Pearl S. Buck, but has also been interpreted as a racial term as it relates to a specific mixing of two races. The U.S. made it virtually impossible for children fathered in Vietnam to ever become U.S. citizens. Many soldiers wanted to bring back their girlfriends or wives and their children back from the war, but the government wouldn't allow it.

The mothers faced discrimination and were in many cases disowned by their families for having a relationship and getting pregnant by a U.S. soldier. The children faced discrimination and isolation growing up as well. Many U.S. soldiers tried for years to get their wives and children out of Vietnam and into the U.S. but the U.S. had already wiped its hands clean of Vietnam and left the Southern portion to the Communist North. Operation Babylift was initiated in South Vietnam in 1975 but there were a limited number of children and orphans that could be rescued.<sup>55</sup>

The lyrics to "Straight to Hell" are ironic and chilling. Joe takes the voice of the U.S. government as he sings, "There ain't no need for ya, go straight to hell boys." In Joe's eyes the U.S. government was saying that the children in Vietnam could go to hell for all that they cared. The beginning of the song mentions, "Speaking King's English in quotation" as many Vietnamese children and mothers tried to learn or improve their English for they'd have a better shot at coming to America. Joe's lyrics definitely pull on listener's heartstrings, as the image of a young child holding a photograph of his parents

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<sup>55</sup> Pinaroc, Joel D., "G.I. babies," *The Manila Times*, 25 April 2004.

becomes ingrained in the listeners mind. The child begs his father to take him home to America but the child is rejected. The terms “papa-san” and “mama-san” are actually Japanese honorifics, instead of Vietnamese but the U.S. soldiers used it incorrectly to refer to the Vietnamese.<sup>56</sup>

The lines, “let me tell you about your blood, bamboo kid – it ain’t Coca-Cola, it’s rice” are bold lyrics, stating that it didn’t matter if their fathers were American, they would always be seen as a foreign Vietnamese in the United States’ eyes. The U.S. took the position that the children were born in South Vietnam and therefore would stay there. There was also the fear that since they were fighting the North Vietnamese there was no sure way to tell if someone was from the North or the South. The U.S. was afraid that a huge influx of children and mothers could possibly become a national threat to the United States, if they happened to be Communists.

Joe does not shy away from taking a stab at his own country as well. In the beginning he sings, “as railhead towns feel the steel mills rust water froze, in the generation, clear as winter ice, this is your paradise” stating that he knows Great Britain is no better off in terms of racism. The shutting down of steel mills in Northern England was becoming a huge problem as more people were left without jobs and turned to immigrants and foreigners as scapegoats.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Kenneth J Bindas, “The Future Is Unwritten: The Clash, Punk and America, 1977-1982,” *American Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Spring 1993), 37.

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David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl, “The Death and Life of Punk, the Last Subculture,” *The Post-subcultures Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).



## “London Calling”

“The ice age is coming, the sun's zooming in  
Meltdown expected, the wheat is growing thin  
Engines stop running, but I have no fear  
'Cause London is drowning, and I live by the river”<sup>58</sup>

Once again inspiration struck Joe while riding home with Gaby and traveling along the bank of the River Thames. In 1988 Joe told Melody Maker that, “...a variety of plagues are upon us, like the Ice Age is coming and sun’s getting closer to the Earth, and London’s gonna drown next times there’s a heavy rain.”<sup>59</sup> Other concerns were that of crop shortages and world wide starvation. Gaby urged Joe to write a song about it.

“London Calling” is an apocalyptic song, describing the many ways the world could possibly end. Whether it be in another ice age (in the mid to late 1970s there were debated hypotheses to as whether the world would heat up or freeze over) or nuclear war or starvation, the song serves as a type of warning. The title of the song came from the BBC World Service’s radio station identification which they used during World War II, “This is London calling...”<sup>60</sup>

The lyrics, “nuclear error” refer to the Three Mile Island accident that was a nuclear meltdown in Dauphin County Pennsylvania. The accident took place on March

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<sup>58</sup> The Clash, “London Calling,” *London Calling*, 1979, Epic.

<sup>59</sup> Marcus Gray, *Route 19 Revisited: The Clash and London Calling* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2010), 197.

<sup>60</sup> Marcus Gray, *Route 19 Revisited: The Clash and London Calling* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2010), 182.



28, 1979 and was one of the worst nuclear disasters the U.S. had ever seen. The Three Mile Island accident helped to give credibility to many anti-nuclear groups, who had predicted accidents. Many groups protested not only in the U.S. but also around the world.<sup>61</sup>

The lyrics, “London is drowning, and I live by the river” refer to the bad weather of 1979, which brought high tides and storms across the southern coast of England. London was not badly affected but Joe thought it was only a matter of time. Joe also lived in a high rise apartment along the Thames, so if a tragedy did happen he thought he be able to witness it all from above.

This was The Clash’s first attempt at an environmental awareness song. Within “London Calling” you can see that seeds were sown. Individual members of The Clash would continue to practice environmental activism. Joe went on to develop the idea of Future Trees (now called The Carbon Neutral Company) in 1996 while at a music festival. The company works with 32 countries around the world to measure and reduce carbon emissions.<sup>62</sup>

Paul Simonon went on to work with Damon Albarn from Blur and Gorillaz, Simon Tong from The Verve and Tony Allen from Fela Kuti to form the band, The Good, The Bad & The Queen in 2006. The band only made one album, but the themes of London sapped by war, and environmental apocalypse ring throughout the record. The

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<sup>61</sup> Samuel J. Walker, *Three Mile Island: A Nuclear Crisis in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>62</sup> “Forest tribute to Clash star,” *BBC News*, 19 January 2003. Accessed 28 February 2012; available from BBC News, <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/scotland/2673971.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/scotland/2673971.stm)>.

feel and purpose of the album is very similar to that of *London Calling*. In 2011 Paul spent time aboard the Greenpeace vessel *Esperanza* in disguise as a cook as a reaction against oil drilling in Greenland by Cairn oil. Paul along with other Greenpeace activists boarded the oilrig illegally, which landed him in jail for two weeks. His true identity was revealed then and after being released from jail, The Good, The Bad & The Queen played a one off show to honor 40 years of Greenpeace.<sup>63</sup>

In 2010 Paul and Mick also joined Gorillaz on their environmental concept album, *Plastic Beach*. This was the first time Paul and Mick had played together since Mick had been sacked from The Clash in 1983.

### **“Washington Bullets”**

“‘N’ if you can find a Afghan rebel  
That the Moscow bullets missed  
Ask him what he thinks of voting Communist...  
...Ask the Dalai Lama in the hills of Tibet,  
How many monks did the Chinese get?  
In a war-torn swamp stop any mercenary,  
‘N’ check the British bullets in his armoury  
Que?  
Sandinista!’”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Sean Michaels, “The Clash’s Paul Simonon arrested while working as undercover Greenpeace activist,” *The Guardian*, 15 November 2011. Accessed 5 January 2012; available from The Guardian, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2011/nov/15/clash-paul-simonon-arrested-greenpeace>>.

<sup>64</sup> The Clash, “Washington Bullets,” *Sandinista!*, 1980, Epic.

“Washington Bullets” is Joe Strummer’s simplified version of Latin American history. The title of the song revolves around U.S. intervention in Latin America.<sup>65</sup> The second verse deals with the death of Victor Jara and thousands of others at the Chile Stadium (renamed the Estadio Victor Jara) in September of 1973. A right wing group along with the Chilean military staged a coup to get rid of Allende’s socialist policies. “As every cell in Chile will tell, The cries of the tortured me, Remember Allende, and the days before, Before the army came, Please remember Victor Jara, In the Santiago Stadium.”

The third verse deals with the Bay of Pigs Invasion and then the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, “For the very first time ever, when they had a revolution in Nicaragua, there was no interference from America, human rights in America” The Sandinistas were an important revolutionary group to The Clash and especially to Joe. Strummer commented numerous times on how he saw the fight in Nicaragua as a good vs. evil conflict.

The Sandinistas (Frente Sandinista de Liberacion National – FSLN) were a revolutionary group that overthrew the Somoza regime in 1979, ending a dictatorship that lasted 46 years. They were named for Cesar Augusto Sandina, who was a hero in Nicaragua for resisting U.S. military occupation from 1927-1933. They were founded in 1962 as a revolutionary group committed to socialism and the overthrow of the Somoza family. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s they gained support mostly among students, farmers and workers.

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<sup>65</sup> Kenneth J Bindas, *The Future Is Unwritten: The Clash, Punk and America, 1977-1982*, American Studies, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Spring 1993), 79.

They worked on attacking the Nicaraguan National Guard in the mid-1970s and President Anastasio Somoza retaliated brutally. The FSLN then split into three factions after two leaders were killed. The Nicaraguan Revolution of 1978-1979 reunited the Sandinistas under the third faction. They were led by Daniel and Humberto Ortega and numbered about 5,000. In July of 1979 they finally overthrew the repressive Somoza family and the National Guard.

The Sandinistas then set up their own governing junta that was headed by Daniel Ortega. Jimmy Carter made efforts to work with the new Nicaraguan government, however when Reagan came to office in 1981 he launched a campaign to isolate the Sandinistas. Because of their Marxist stance, President Reagan and the United State helped arm and finance contras who were based in Honduras to attack Nicaragua. Ortega created the Sandinista Popular Army and organized a secret police force to guard against the contras. The Sandinistas became dependent on support from the Soviet Union and Cuba as they pushed even farther to the political left. The Sandinistas came under suspicion however after barely allowing opposing political parties to form. They also went on to censor press and newspapers that painted them in a bad light. In many ways the revolutionary ideals the Sandinistas had fought for were disappearing.<sup>66</sup>

In 1987 Joe Strummer starred in *Walker*, a historical film about U.S. intervention in Central America in the 1850s, which was filmed in Nicaragua. While on the set of the movie Joe was asked:

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<sup>66</sup> Christine J. Wade and Thomas W. Walker, *Nicaragua: Living in the Shadow of the Eagle*, (Westview Press, Boulder Colorado, 2011).

“What are your feelings about filming in Nicaragua?”

“For me, it was a long winter in Britain and pretty depressing, right? So I was feeling generally fed up, and I came down here and it was just what I needed—to see people who’ve really got nothing, but are coping and laughing and still enjoying life. On the backlot here in Granada, I was walking along with another actor, Jack Slater, and we saw these kids playing baseball with homemade balls and hand-carved bats, and basketball with a cardboard box attached to a telegraph pole, and there was a little girl with a plastic bag filled with air, which she was throwing up and catching. And even though they had nothing, they were all having a really good time. I’ve been here about two months, and in that time you realize that this is just a normal country that happens to have a leftist government that is trying to sort its problems out. Things aren’t so black and white here as I’ve found from looking from far away with a pro- or anti-Sandinista, or pro- or anti-Reagan or -Thatcher stance. When you get here, all that hardly seems to make any sense. It just seems like that the country’s a helluva lot better off than it was under Somoza, when there wasn’t any education or medical care and half the population was kept illiterate. Compared to those days, they’ve made vast progress—any human being would surely be in favor of that.”

“What about the progress in Nicaragua since the revolution?”

“There are many factions inside the Sandinistas, and they’ll probably have little power struggles and adjust. It’ll probably bubble down to some kind of even keel, and it’ll always be more central than extreme Maoist. It’s a pity the U.S.A.

doesn't trade with countries like Nicaragua. I don't think the U.S.A. will invade—I think this is Reagan's personal obsession, and as he passes away so the obsession will, too."<sup>67</sup>

Lastly, "Washington Bullets" takes a stab at the Soviet Union for invading Afghanistan and at The People's Republic of China for killing pacifist Buddhist monks in the Cultural Revolution, "N' if you can find a Afghan rebel, that the Moscow bullets missed, ask him what he thinks of voting Communist..., ...Ask the Dalai Lama in the hills of Tibet, how many monks did the Chinese get? In a war-torn swamp stop any mercenary." For even if The Clash were extremely leftish in their political views, they never allowed themselves to be blinded by injustices caused by other groups they initially supported.

## **Conclusion**

The members of The Clash lived the early part of their lives as outsiders. They were able to see the world and injustices based on race and class in an unbiased way. They expressed their frustration, anger and passion of the times through the songs they wrote. The Clash were a voice not only of the punk movement, but of a generation. Time and time again they practiced what they preached. They sold their albums at an extremely low price, treated their fans with dignity and respect and weren't afraid to criticize Communist and Socialist groups that they had originally backed. The sincerity, truth and rawness of their songs, makes their music extremely relevant up to the present day.

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<sup>67</sup> Graham Fuller, "A Blast From The Past: Joe Strummer Interview," *Film Society Lincoln Center*, 1987. Accessed 19 January 2012, <<http://www.filmlinc.com/film-comment/article/a-blast-from-the-past-joe-strummer-interview>>.



Today the surviving members of The Clash are still making music. Paul and Mick's current musical collaborations show their continued interest in environmentalism and prove that they are still to this day, rebels with a cause.



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